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ABSTRACT

In one sense, it has never been easier to be a feminist in composition studies. In another, it has never been harder. While the variety of scholarship is rich and the role models plentiful, there are forces at work that are making it difficult to maintain connections. Among feminists, lately there has been an impulse to define theoretical boundaries, to stake territorial claims, not against patriarchy but against other feminists. While this categorizing might be seen as a celebration of multiplicity, it might also be seen as a symptom of professionalization. Among graduate students, there is increasing fear about not finding jobs, about not getting published. There is a real sense that the new world of feminism is shrinking along with related job opportunities and funding. For feminists, disciplinarity is leading to a feeling of being divided between that self that desires community, spiritual fulfillment, time for false starts and reflection, and that self seeking a Ph.D., a job, publication, and tenure. Effort to negotiate between feminist and masculinist forces is draining. The answers to this crisis may lie in the past, in a time when scholars could afford to be supportive of each other and saw publication as one path toward establishment rather than the only path. (TB)

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On the Prospects for Feminism in a Field that's Come of Age:

The Younger Generation's Perspective

As part of the younger generation, my experiences of the relationship between feminism and composition have been somewhat different from those of Hildy, Lilly, and Louise. My introduction to our field, a composition theory and practice class conducted by Joy Ritchie in 1990, was decidedly feminist. Our reading list included the names of feminists working within composition (Phelps, Ede and Lunsford, Annas), as well as feminists writing from other fields (Cixous). We discussed the positive potential of feminist teaching principles such as process, collaboration, and community. And Joy's methods of facilitating the course reflected these principles. Importantly, Joy's class was not an isolated feminist phenomenon for me. Most of my courses for both my MA and PhD degrees were taught by women who considered themselves feminists and who attempted to reflect their commitment to feminism in reading lists, class discussions, writing assignments, and assessment. The connections made between feminism and composition in these classes has been complemented by all of the rich research on feminist concerns that has been presented at our conferences and published in our journals and books since Elizabeth Flynn's 1988 charge that "the fields of feminist studies and composition studies have not engaged each other in a serious or systematic way" ("Composing" 425). Indeed, unlike Hildy, whose feminist role models could, in the 1980's, be counted on one hand, I have more possible role models than I could hope to keep track of.

What all of this should mean is that, in the 1990's, it has never been easier to be a feminist compositionist, that it has never been easier to translate feminist

concerns into composition pedagogy, research, and scholarship. Role models are visible and plentiful; teaching techniques based on feminist ways of knowing, of being, are now a standard part of many composition curriculums; feminist methodologies are gaining attention within our research community; and feminist ways of writing, which privilege multiplicity of voices, of perspectives, which emphasize standpoint and reflection, are being employed more often. At the same time, however, there are forces at work in both feminism and composition that are making it difficult to maintain connections--just as the connections seem to be getting easier to make. Among feminists, for instance, there lately has been an impulse to clearly define theoretical boundaries, to stake territorial claims--not against patriarchy, or androcentric enterprises, as was the case in the early days, but against other feminists. Such an impulse has been captured by articles like Flynn's "Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition," which begins with "working definitions of selected feminisms." Included among these "feminisms" are "liberal feminism," "radical feminism," "cultural feminism," and "postmodern feminism." While some might see such categorizing as a celebration of multiplicity, as a testimony to the field's continuing commitment to diversity, others see it as an indication of a more general tendency toward professionalization both within the academy and without, a tendency toward establishing ideological hierarchies, toward asserting authority and status not with others, but over others--over those who represent different ideological positions. Hildy has noticed this tendency in upper division writing classes and in graduate rhetoric seminars, where students who represent a "postmodern" position dismiss feminist work that might be considered "cultural," i.e., Gilligan, Belenky, early Annas, Flynn, Bolker. This tendency has become most apparent to me in the way that my immediate feminist role models (faculty at the University of Louisville) conduct classes, carry out research, and mentor graduate students--all of them from different feminist perspectives, and many of them anxious

about the difference, nervous about the distance they perceive between their particular locations and those represented by colleagues. This anxiety gets transferred to graduate students like me who worry not so much about whether to be a feminist teacher and researcher, but what kind of feminist to be. For me, there is no clear choice. I appreciate postmodern views of self and language, but know how important it is for women students--at all levels--to read books like In a Different Voice and Women's Ways of Knowing and to realize that there are cultural explanations for feeling silenced, insecure, out of place in the academy. I know how crucial it is for women to read "The Politics of Style" or "Teaching Griselda to Write," and to recognize in themselves the same alienation from masculinist discourse, the same struggle with authority, experienced by Annas's and Bolker's students.

Compounding the tensions within feminism are new tensions that I see within composition--tensions that can also be attributed to professionalization. Last year in Washington, D.C., Robert Connors described some of these tensions. In his panel presentation on composition history and disciplinarity, Connors talked about how composition was becoming more and more specialized, how specialization was leading to a kind of competitiveness, a new brand of in-fighting that he did not remember seeing in past decades. He talked about the increasing tendency to value research over teaching, the increasing pressure to publish during graduate school. He spoke, also, about the decreasing number of composition jobs for an increasing number of comp/rhet PhDs. All of these phenomena, he claimed, are attributable to disciplinarity, to the field's coming of age, realizing its adulthood. I remember listening to his talk and thinking, "Yes, these are the tensions I've been feeling; these are the tensions I and other graduate students have been talking about, worrying about, but never with the words 'professionalization' or 'disciplinarity' attached."

Since Connors's talk last year, I've been observing the manifestations of

professionalization in our field and thinking about consequences--for composition, in general, but also for individuals--especially those who consider themselves feminists. Among graduate students in my department and elsewhere, there is increasing fear about not finding jobs, about not getting published; there is a feeling of pressure--to target a research topic early on so that seminar papers can be written on that topic and used as a quick route not only to the dissertation, but to conference presentations, journal articles, a book. There's a real sense that a field that was once seen as a kind of "new world," a wide realm of almost infinite possibility, is shrinking. Job opportunities are shrinking; publishing opportunities (at least regarding the "premier" composition publications) are shrinking; funding opportunities are shrinking. The obvious results of such feelings are many: there's an increased sense of competition (even among the most congenial colleagues); there's a subtle reluctance to share ideas, an inclination to be vague about the ideas that are shared; there's a hesitancy about collaborating--because collaboration takes more time than working individually and time is shrinking, too. Further, the sense of a shrinking composition economy is causing people to choose research topics on the basis of "marketability," more so than out of personal interest or commitment, and to take fewer risks. Where, in the past, the question that commonly accompanied the topic selection process was likely to be "What does the field need?" these days it's "What does the field want?" or, more succinctly, "Is it hot?"

For feminists I know, disciplinarity is leading to the same sense of psychic split experienced by women literary critics in the 80's--a feeling of being divided between that self or aspect of self which desires community, spiritual fulfillment, time for false starts and reflection, on the one hand, and another self that understands too well what it takes these days to get a Ph.D., to get a job, to get published, to get tenure. For many of us, the effort to negotiate feminist and masculinist forces is draining. For those of us

who are feminists, the effort can be especially debilitating. One reason for this is that feminism, for many, is not simply a lens through which to observe the writing scene; it's not simply a research paradigm. It is a way of being in the profession, a way of conducting ourselves as researchers, yes, but also as writers, as teachers, as administrators, as colleagues. I do not want to suggest that disciplinarity or professionalization are, in themselves, bad or evil processes. I do want to suggest, as feminists like Sharon O'Brien have suggested, that professionalization is a masculinizing process (250). While it can result and has resulted in increased status for feminism and for composition, while it has resulted in increased jobs and status for feminists and compositionists of older generations, it is also creating a great deal of anxiety among members of my generation who came to composition with the simple desire to help others realize themselves as writers and as people.

I came today, as part of the younger generation, to raise questions about the future of feminism in composition. As my discussion has indicated, I think the future is filled with challenges. We can only meet these challenges with a clear sense of where we have been, as well as where we are going. We need to accept, perhaps, what may have been an inevitable giving in or giving over to professionalizing forces in the field, forces that are generated by larger institutional forces. But at the same time, we need to acknowledge the human costs of professionalization and seek ways of decreasing these costs. My own sense is that we have the answers and that these answers lie in composition's past--in a time when, I am told, people were more supportive of each other and more inclined to see publication as one path toward establishing oneself in the field--rather than the only path. And we have answers in feminism, too--in such fundamental ideas as collaboration, community, process, and sympathy. How the past will get translated into a future that recognizes both institutional needs and the needs of the individuals who live within the institution--I'm not sure. I do know that it will

involve a commitment to balance, to integration, to intellectual and emotional well-being and that this commitment must be shared by feminists of all persuasions, whether they be liberal, cultural, radical, postmodern, and by feminists of all generations. There is much to be done, and it will take all of us to do it.

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